



# A Culture of Comprehensive Excellence

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I love that companies and industries use buzzwords like “Best in Class,” “Operational Excellence,” and “Superior Customer Service.” When reading those, you have to read them out loud in your 11 o’clock news anchor voice, right? Success and culture are tied together, and we’re all trying to replicate that of Apple, Google, and Southwest Airlines because they’ve proven it’s true and it works. A successful culture generates a promising company, but your perception of your culture is not always the reality. You can’t be a Facebook feed culture of “Everything is wonderful! My family is the best and my son is the next LeBron James!” I’m not saying these posts aren’t accurate, just improbable. True self-reflection, open constrictive criticism, and the voice of others are true assessments of yourself and your organizational culture.

Like many, I have thought long and hard about how to create a perfect culture and realized that it can’t be a one-person job. It can’t be manifested into a document or championed by a group of people who do not believe in it. It can’t be short lived and can’t be without leadership that employs it. It can’t be forced upon people, and the key, more than anything, is that it is based on honesty and self-reflection. Culture is comprehensive. It’s more comprehensive than any strategic plan and more complicated than any model. Culture can’t be bought like a program or software. It’s led by visionary executive management; developed by process, procedure, and the intellect of middle management; and delivered by passionate, trustworthy, and competent employees. You can’t manifest culture in short-term bursts through bonuses or company parties. Like the popular caffeine drinks on the market today, that manipulated energy does not last when it comes to culture. Eventually, it’s almost guaranteed to crash.

To create a culture of success, which includes winning and achieving goals, your attitude and ideas must be comprehensive

throughout the organization. They also should have clear accountability and the strongest face of the organization embracing it, believing it and living it daily. I will use the back-to-back Stanley Cup Champions, the Pittsburgh Penguins, as an example. The team is led by a decorated competitor, Sidney Crosby (the employees); a passionate head coach, Mike Sullivan (middle management); and strong ownership, Mario Lemieux (executive management), that bleeds into the overall culture of the organization. You can’t do just one thing great. You must strive to do all things great, and that’s exactly what the Penguins do. They have a simple, yet ambitious, strategic goal “to be the best team in sports.” The maintenance man up to the ranks of Mario know this, but how they achieve it is emphasizing comprehensive excellence in all areas. Using hockey again for example, comprehensive excellence is achieved off ice (training, nutrition, community involvement, scouting, coaching, marketing, fan base, etc.) and on ice (competitiveness, leadership, desire to win, talent, etc.). If teams are not striving to be the best in all these areas, they will not have long-term successful franchises. The Pittsburgh Penguins is the best organization in sports because it follows this comprehensive approach and nothing else.

Let me be clear, creating a culture of excellence does not mean you have to be the best in every area versus your competition. That may be impossible. However, it does mean you must possess the desire to achieve greatness in the core elements of your business model. This may be five or even 20 specific areas. The point is that everyone knows what those areas are, fully embraces them, and shares in their successes. Banking is no different. You must want greatness, strive for it, and exhibit the desire. Identify your core. Being a good bank with good customer service offering good products will not take you to the next level that so many are aspiring to achieve. To be the best, you must have a culture of comprehensive excellence.

Here are six keys for executive management and board members should remember:

1. **Brand:** Believe in the brand. Bleed it. Understand the mission and vision. Be involved in the bank and out of the bank. Do what is best for the bank and not solely what is best for you or your department. Cross-sell, cross-develop and cross-inspire.
2. **Stress Test:** Stress-test everything! Don't be content in your current existence. Stress-test your balance sheet, your customer base, your products, your employees — challenge everything.
3. **Develop:** Let your employees and customers develop and evolve. Do not allow for stagnant employees who have no ambition. Let them succeed. Let them fail.
4. **Accountability:** Employees want it. They take pride in their work and want to achieve success. Reward when

appropriate and provide constructive criticism when necessary. Accountability is both good and bad — as long as you learn from the bad.

5. **Lead:** Do not manage — lead. Managing is ensuring a set of tasks gets done. Leading is for the overall benefit of the organization. People follow leaders, not managers.
6. **Purpose:** What you do is banking and that is no different than any other bank. To grow and be successful, your bank must have a “well-known and clear purpose.” This purpose is about the customer and employees, not the shareholders.

Creating a culture of excellence requires the involvement of everyone, otherwise it wouldn't be comprehensive. Excellence takes a passion that many aren't willing to sacrifice to achieve. Try it! You may just create something great. ■

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